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ABSTRACT

This report profiles the state departments of education (SEAs) in Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, Nevada, and North Dakota. These SEAs reported in 1996 that they had changed from a departmental structure (e.g., separate units for special education), into cross-cutting teams in the previous five years. Findings indicate that since the 1996 study, three of the seven states have gone through another structural reorganization, and the others have continued to evolve. Reasons cited for SEA reorganization included changes in response to legislative directives, the strategic plan of the governor or commissioner, or to improve monitoring by approaching it in a more comprehensive manner. Some states wanted to eliminate duplication among divisions, and one SEA decided to reorganize to initiate better departmental-level planning. Benefits of cross-cutting teams include increased attention to the needs of students with disabilities, increased knowledge and awareness throughout various divisions, the inclusion of diverse learners in the planning for systemic reform at the beginning rather than as an afterthought, increased inclusion, a comprehensive approach for education students with disabilities, an expansion of resources, and increased collaboration at the local level. Challenges to successful team functioning are also discussed. The document closes with individual state profiles. (CR)

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS
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QUICK TURN AROUND

PROJECT FORUM

# CROSS-CUTTING TEAMS IN STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

By
PATRICE LINEHAN

AUGUST 2000

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Quick Turn Around

Project FORUM

*QTA – a brief analysis of a critical issue in special education*

## Cross-cutting Teams in State Education Agencies

**August 2000**

*By Patrice Linehan*

### Background and Purpose

In 1996, Project FORUM studied changes in organizational structure within state education agencies (SEAs) and the impact of those changes on management and leadership in special education.[1] One of the findings from the 1996 study was that a number of states had changed from a departmental structure (e.g., separate units for special education), into cross-cutting teams, in the previous five years. This document profiles seven states that reported organizing around cross-cutting teams in 1996, focusing on changes in SEA functions (e.g., professional development, technical assistance, capacity-building, monitoring).

### Method and Terminology

As part of Project FORUM's work on its Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), state directors or their representatives from seven states were interviewed in July, August and September 1999. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes.

Many of the interviewees questioned what was meant by the term "cross-cutting team." For the purposes of this study, the definition was left quite flexible, including any team that consisted of representatives from various departments, divisions, agencies, or disciplines in the SEA. Some teams focus on a particular population or student issue, while others cover the full range of interdepartmental and/or agency coordination.

### SEA Organization

Since the 1996 Project FORUM study, three of the seven states have gone through another structural reorganization, and the others have continued to evolve. At least one state views this continual review and refinement process as a positive mechanism for meeting the complex needs of the system. Thus, additional reorganizing or refining of the SEA structure is not always considered negative. Rather, it may be viewed as an on-going learning process.

*Impetus for Reorganization*

There were a number of reasons cited for SEA reorganization by the profiled states. States reorganized in response to legislative directives, the strategic plan of the governor or commissioner, or to improve monitoring by approaching it in a more comprehensive manner. Some states wanted to eliminate duplication among divisions, and one SEA decided to reorganize to initiate better departmental-level planning. While six of the seven states mentioned that at least some

[1] Schrag, J., (1996). *Organizational change within state education agencies: Impact on management and leadership in special education.* Alexandria, VA: Project FORUM at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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aspect of cross-cutting teams is focused on new ideas or innovations, the underlying catalyst for the new cross-cutting teams was related to the educational standards and accountability for results movement.

*SEA Structure*

The structure of the special education division remains intact in two of the seven profiled states. In these states, the special education personnel meet in regional or cross-divisional teams in addition to their other duties. In three of the states, the special education division was merged with other divisions serving targeted populations (e.g., students living in poverty, English language learners, migrant and homeless students) or those providing specific programs (e.g., vocational and adult education, vocational rehabilitation, and urban education). Two of these three states report an increase in joint activities and dissemination, while the other maintains some special education functions in addition to new divisional tasks. In the final two states profiled, the special education division was in effect eliminated. The staff members from the former special education division were reassigned to other divisions to infuse special education expertise into work in other areas.

*Staffing*

Five of the seven states profiled maintained the same level of staffing following the SEA reorganization. However, some personnel positions changed, and one state reported that the staff felt a loss of authority over some special education issues. Initially, a reduction in personnel occurred as a result of restructuring in two states, but one later reorganized and expanded the special education bureau by coordinating it with school health and education programs.

*Sharing of Resources*

In addition to inter-divisional teams, some cross-cutting initiatives involve other departments or agencies (e.g., health, human services, early childhood and juvenile justice). To some degree, all seven states profiled encourage this type of multi-agency approach to special education issues. However, one state reported that few external representatives actually participate on the cross-cutting teams.

The cross-cutting teams combine funds from various divisions and/or agencies in six of the seven states profiled. However, in one of these, special education carries the heaviest cost burden. Due to the way cross-cutting teams are organized, special education reportedly funds personnel throughout the agency. It is also important to note that the level of shared funding varies among the six states cited. Some cross-cutting teams share costs on specific short-term issues, while others take a more integrated planning approach.

**Benefits of Cross-cutting Teams**

The following benefits were described by state personnel:

*Awareness and Support*

Overwhelmingly, interviewees reported that the number of individuals drawing attention to the needs of students with disabilities increased as a result of cross-cutting teams. This is attributed to the fact that individuals have a better understanding of the components handled by other departments (e.g., special and general education) and the products and services that are needed to enhance educational experiences for all students.

*Broader Vision*

The involvement of individuals across disciplines has increased knowledge and awareness throughout various divisions. Individuals see a broader picture as a result of working together on cross-cutting teams, and people learn more as all sides are exposed to innovations and approaches to problem-solving. The SEA is able to focus on the needs of discrete parts of the larger system and see how things fit together.

*Unified System*

In the planning for systemic reform (e.g., standards and assessment), diverse learners are included from the beginning, rather than as an afterthought. Participatory decision-making often leads to unified support for implementation from superintendents and state boards of education. Therefore, interaction with educational leaders on special education issues can become a positive endeavor.

*Inclusion*

Interviewees report that the inclusion of students with special needs in general education classrooms has risen since cross-cutting teams were introduced. There is more involvement of general education in all functions and products related to special education. For example, professional development is approached in a larger context, and literacy teams have been formed that include Title I, at-risk and special education leadership and resources.

*Comprehensive Approach*

In many cases, the special education staff is now better positioned to advocate and plan for the needs of students by being part of the larger entity. In the past, it was more difficult to advocate for the ten percent of the population represented by students receiving special education services. Now, the unique needs of students with disabilities are considered along with those of other diverse learners, such as English language learners and students living in poverty. Together, these students represent a large part of the population and can no longer be disregarded as a small part of the student body.

*Expansion of Resources*

Another result of cross-cutting teams has been an increase in available funds, materials, and intellectual capacity. For example, when preparing State Improvement Grant (SIG) applications, cross-cutting teams served as a resource for brainstorming ideas. Interagency and cross-disciplinary teams provide a wealth of input, and comprehensive professional development products were mentioned as a positive outcome of collaborative efforts.

*Modeling of Collaboration*

Teams model what the SEA expects relationships to be like at the LEA level. As a result of these teams, there is now more LEA and state level collaboration to improve outcomes for students. For example, the state agency models the collaboration it wants to foster (e.g., combined resources) at the LEA level by requiring consolidated plans when LEAs apply for SEA funding.

## Challenges to Successful Team Functioning

Respondents shared the following problem areas:

*Sustaining Teams*

As with any team, sustaining participation can be difficult. Interviewees commented on the important, yet cumbersome, task of constantly familiarizing new members with the work of the cross-cutting teams. Repeated orientation makes it difficult to maintain motivation and a focus on the issue(s). Interviewees noted that momentum must be constantly infused by regular team-building.

*Constant Change/Fluidity*

Although the cross-cutting team structure is considered to be working well in the states that were part of this study, it is always evolving to meet changing needs. Respondents also noted that challenges result from involving more people in the decision-making process, and the addition of new functions. Questions arise about some functions, such as monitoring, and what they mean for whole schools rather than just special education.

*Time*

Decisions made by cross-cutting teams are said to take more time (in some cases up to three times longer) due to the increased number of people, divisions, or agencies involved. In addition, a staff member's time may be divided, which can diffuse staff energy and sometimes make it difficult to contact specific individuals.

*Coordination of Activities*

Coordination has been difficult for some cross-cutting teams. People are sometimes overwhelmed and struggle to prioritize agendas. Following-up on commitments that individuals, divisions or agencies have made can be difficult to coordinate, resulting in inconsistency. At times, teams make reasoned decisions but it is difficult to impact separate systems and get individuals from diverse fields together.

*Communication*

Communication with individuals in different departments or divisions can be a challenge and improved methods of communication must be devised to enhance the efficiency of teams. E-mail, video conferencing, and conference calls are recommended as possible ways to improve communication for cross-cutting teams.

*Commitment*

In order for cross-cutting teams to be successful, the strategic plan must be designed by all divisions, and resources committed to make the plan a "living document." It was the sense of interviewees that positions should not be eliminated when teams are formed. This is because the additional functions of restructuring and managing education reform are said to require that more individuals be deployed to multiple programmatic functions.

**State Profiles**

The seven state profiles are summarized in the following sections:

*Colorado*

In 1996, Colorado was organized into two types of cross-cutting teams: (1) ad hoc teams formed solely to address a particular problem or issue, and (2) self-directed teams that managed an entire process with shared leadership. Then, in 1998-1999, the SEA reorganized into regional service teams. While the original cross-cutting teams came together with the hope of creating synergy to develop new ideas, the current structure

focuses on forming teams in response to such ideas or innovations.

Although the special education department stayed intact, representatives now sit on the regional service teams. The new regional teams still cut across departments and focus on issues such as standards, assessment, literacy and, more recently, a new accreditation process. The Literacy team includes individuals from early childhood, special education and at-risk divisions. An example of an ad hoc team, focused on a particular issue, is Early Childhood. This team includes representatives from all the early childhood federal program areas, as well as the departments of human services and health personnel.

Accountability for improving educational outcomes for all students is driving the work of the SEA, and creating a heightened awareness of monitoring, which is evolving to ensure general education monitoring efforts incorporate special education requirements. The SEA now contracts out more tasks than it did prior to the reorganization. One example of this is that publication companies now develop some special education materials for the SEA.

When specific knowledge or expertise is necessary to insure that the needs of students with disabilities are met, the special education division still takes primary responsibility (e.g., knowledge of low-incidence disabilities and/or specialized populations). However, in general, people throughout the department are looking at educational issues through a broader lens than before reorganization. Rather than approach issues in isolated divisions, the teams are focusing on larger issues. For example, funds are being provided from Title I to pay part of a full time regional employee's salary to work on professional development issues with the comprehensive system of personnel development (CSPD).

*Florida*

Florida's cross-cutting teams were first developed in 1995-1996 specifically for joint monitoring. The teams were developed as a result of the commissioner's strategic plan that addresses specific issues being implemented through new state legislation. In response to new legislation, cross-cutting teams may be formed -- formally and informally -- to perform particular functions or accomplish activities related to the legislation.

Additional teams were formed as the SEA downsized and began to work more efficiently. At first, the special education bureau lost staff like every other division, but the last reorganization actually expanded the visibility of the special education department by coordinating it with school health and education programs. These cross-cutting teams sometimes work with other agencies (e.g., Juvenile Justice) on issues related to special education. Some of the cross-cutting teams are permanent (e.g., teacher preparation or educational accountability), and others are temporary. The budget is controlled by the lead division of the particular issue being addressed by the team. However, the external teams that focus on interagency collaboration do share costs.

The main change resulting from reorganization is that functions such as technical assistance and information dissemination are thought to have improved. This is because there is an increased awareness among divisions and agencies on cross-disciplinary issues. Although the teams do not generally affect specific programmatic functions, there has been a

rise in joint activities and dissemination on some initiatives, such as assessment and reading. The SEA also now contracts out some core special education functions, such as the CSPD.

Since the initial restructuring, the number of cross-cutting teams has increased, and teams focus more on broader state-wide issues such as educational accountability. As a result, the accountability system, which has received much attention in recent years, increasingly considers the needs of special populations.

*Illinois*

The Illinois SEA organized into cross-cutting teams in 1995-1996. Special education and vocational education, which had been perceived as "dynasties," were most affected by restructuring, and the Special Education Department was diffused throughout the organization. Because reorganization was prompted by the state standards movement, the monitoring staff now work directly with the teams ensuring implementation of the learning standards. However, the special education monitoring and compliance division stayed intact.

Teams meet for approximately 18 months to two years on specific projects, such as curriculum or assessment. Representatives from other state agencies, such as human services or health, are also encouraged to participate on the teams. While participants may sit on multiple teams, attempts are made to keep the maximum number down to three related teams.

Since reorganizing into cross-cutting teams, some functions are handled differently. For example, the SEA contracted out development of its state assessments. Although the cross-cutting teams and the roles of special education representatives were supposed to remain permanent, there are concerns that special education issues got lost in the reorganization. Because the focus of special education services was thought to have been too dispersed, Illinois is now in the process of redesigning the structure.

*Kentucky*

In 1994, the Kentucky SEA made a comprehensive move toward creating cross-cutting teams. Some former Exceptional Children's Services staff members are now working in other divisions and infusing special education expertise into their work in those areas. Although lines of authority and responsibilities of individuals did not change significantly, cross-cutting teams are seen as a way to get people together across departments, divisions, agencies and disciplines.

Generally, there are three types of teams: those that . are on-going or permanent, intermediary teams that last approximately 18 months, and short-term teams that usually meet for six months or less to address a specific issue. Staff members choose a team based on their expertise, interest, or opportunity for professional growth. When functions overlap, the teams sometimes combine efforts. Decisions regarding participants, budget, leadership and name vary depending on the particular team and focus. Some teams have a leader, while others share leadership responsibilities. At times, there is much autonomy of decision-making given to participants of a particular team.

Under the current organizational design, the Division of Exceptional Children's Services continues to carry out many of the same functions with a smaller staff. The division

contracts out some of the functions that it once did in order to be more efficient. There are also a number of priority issues that are not contracted out, such as monitoring. Monitoring is still done by the Division of Exceptional Services and the division has been able to maintain, or surpass, the standards set for LEA participation.

Student accountability and curriculum issues are dealt with day-to-day by many divisions. Many former special education staff members are serving in these divisions and special education issues are increasingly being considered as part of the overall system.

*Missouri*

Missouri's cross-cutting teams have evolved since they were first started in 1994-1995. They were developed in response to the governor's outcomes for the SEA. The state government directed all agencies to become involved with the state strategies, and the issues the teams deal with are related to the strategic planning directives based on the governor's priorities. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education works through the interdisciplinary teams to meet the goals and outcomes of the strategic plan. The SEA did not consider the team development a "reorganization" although special effort was made to eliminate duplication and to alleviate staff concerns about extra work.

The special education department stayed intact during the restructuring, and both the teams and the role of the special education representative on each team are expected to be permanent. The inter-divisional teams are comprised of representatives from each of the seven divisions, and include both professional and support staff. There are also interdepartmental teams that take innovative approaches to service delivery and/or resources across multiple agencies. These programs work on common issues across departments. In some cases, teams have been collapsed as a result of overlapping responsibilities. The leadership regularly shares concerns and funding to resolve issues.

There have been two main changes since Missouri organized into cross-cutting teams: (1) there are fewer teams than there were five years ago, and (2) the teams are much more proactively involved in strategic planning rather than their original function of simply responding to the issues mandated by the governor, and reacting to the priorities set for educational goals and outcomes. A major improvement has been the transformation of information into useable data that resulted from data requirements related to suspension and expulsion and the gun-free schools program.

Broader school reform initiatives have also been positively affected by the cross-cutting teams. For example, representatives from Special Education, Title I and Urban and Teacher Education come together to discuss professional development issues, such as recruiting well-qualified personnel across all disciplines. The recruitment of qualified workers -- whether in general education, special education, or in a specific subject such as science -- is now an integral part of all division efforts.

*Nevada*

In 1995, the entire structure of the Nevada SEA was changed to create teams across content areas. This reorganization was driven by the SEA's desire to plan on a departmental level, rather than through individual branches such as special education, standards, and basic education.

As part of the reorganization, the roles and functions of every department were listed and units that carried out similar functions were merged. The SEA conducted an internal and external needs assessment involving multiple stakeholders. Through this process, five goals for schools were identified, which drove the development of the teams.

Restructuring took approximately two years, and resulted in three levels of cross-cutting teams: *leadership teams*, *topical teams*, and *focus teams*. The *leadership teams* (e.g., Equity, Licensure, and Accountability) include all the areas identified as necessary to carry out SEA functions. Individual leadership team members apply to serve as leaders of these teams and, if chosen, serve as the core planning team known as the Leadership Team. This separate Leadership Team, consisting of the leaders of each leadership team, represents the structural core of the SEA.

Initially, the *topical teams* were developed as temporary teams. However, some of them are considered an integral part of the structure and are now on-going (e.g., professional development, school improvement, and technology). These topical teams apply for renewal each year by providing a prospectus outlining goals for the year, and outside agencies are involved when appropriate.

The *focus teams* work on specific, short-term issues or sporadic needs identified and defined by the Leadership Team. These teams also draw up a prospectus, which can be renewed annually according to need. However, there is no money designated in the budget for focus teams.

Special Education is now a part of the larger leadership team body known as the Equity Team, which includes all those departments that are working to meet the needs of diverse learners (e.g., English language learners, refugees, and bilingual students). There was no reduction in personnel as a result of the reorganization, however, there was an increase in the number of functions managed by each person on the Equity Team.

While the restructuring improved the influence of the former special education branch, it has also demanded an increased time commitment from the staff. For example, under the previous structure, the special education branch needed to develop the CSPD only for special educators; however, the Equity Team is now addressing personnel needs for staff working with all students. In addition to the team's new functions, it continues its traditional monitoring and technical assistance functions.

Although the reorganization is considered to be permanent, there is continual review and refinement of the structure to meet the complex needs of the system. This process is viewed as a positive mechanism for on-going improvement. The key is planning on a departmental level while also planning for overall school improvement.

*North Dakota*

North Dakota has used cross-cutting teams to accomplish finite, short-term tasks or activities for some time, but the department structure was not changed as a result of these teams. In 1998, in response to a legislative directive, a new cross-cutting team was formed to consolidate and rethink the organizational structure for state educational improvement. Prior to 1998, the SEA structure included five hierarchical levels with the State Superintendent and State Board at the top, supported by the

Executive Operations Management Council and Planning and Policy Council. Fiscal and Personnel Directors reported to the Executive Operations and Superintendent levels. The next level included the Department Divisions, and Special Education was found among numerous other divisions under the Department Division level.

The new cross-cutting team formed in 1998 consisted of Planning and Policy team leaders, and was charged with consolidating and changing the management structure. The members of this team were the Chairpersons of Legislative and Public Information, Education Improvement, Accountability, Technical Assistance, and Operations and Support. This select team was formed outside the division structure and reported directly to the State Superintendent.

After about a year of working with both types of cross-cutting teams, team members had learned what was, and was not, effective. At that time, some of the original cross-cutting teams continued and others were eliminated. A task force was established to make recommendations to the superintendent as to which teams should continue. An overall reduction in personnel occurred after the reformation of the teams, but the special education unit stayed intact and retained leadership on all issues related to students with disabilities.

In June of 1999, the cross-cutting team that was originally formed outside the organizational structure was integrated under the Management Council when the Superintendent assigned the policy and planning team leaders to serve on each of four division teams (School Improvement, Targeted Populations, District Support and Technology, and Division of Independent Study). The numerous teams that existed in the former structure were consolidated to plan in clusters. This is the structure that is in place now.

The Management Council – represented by the policy and planning team leaders – oversees the four divisions. The Council facilitates the strategic plan with cross-cutting input from the four division managers. The Management Council assigns and coordinates tasks (e.g., professional development, technical assistance, and communication) among the divisions, reporting directly to the state superintendent.

There are currently six or seven teams that are expected to be temporary. Individuals are asked to make a three year minimum commitment to these teams, addressing issues such as technical assistance, public information, and operations. If the work of the team is not completed in the first three year cycle, the same unit representatives or other designees will be asked to continue serving. All team members receive staff development on the team-building process and effective teaming.

Within the same time frame, there was also an underlying move toward accountability and monitoring, and these functions were addressed across all teams. For instance, one cross-cutting team made up of staff from general education, Safe and Drug-free Schools, adult education, and approval and accreditation, works on educational accountability activities. Standards were established and technical assistance became department-wide.

Although still in the early stages of development, North Dakota anticipates some important changes as a result of the cross-cutting teams. Teams are now setting


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model for how to work together. More expected in the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development, and cross-cutting teams have helped prepare the State Improvement Grant (SIG) application by incorporating input on personnel guidelines from the approval and educational accreditation division. These guidelines addressed overall personnel issues within the state and, therefore, strengthened the SIG.

**Concluding Remarks**

Reorganization into cross-cutting teams may occur in response to legislative directives, changes in SEA leadership, or identified needs. In some cases, participation on cross-cutting teams may be encouraged but not viewed as critical to accomplishing individual tasks. Other leaders may expect all SEA planning and decision-making to occur through cross-cutting teams, which then makes the teams integral to the structure and culture of that organization.

The structure of funding streams or specific programs can enhance or inhibit collaboration in the form of cross-cutting teams. When the staff from one program feels it is carrying the financial burden of another, the situation may cause a barrier to collaborative efforts. Some state and federal programs (e.g., Safe and Drug-free Schools federal program) require collaboration with others which may lead to the formation of cross-cutting teams.

Although the popular belief is that collaboration is necessary and good, it is important to consider that SEAs vary in size and complexity. Members of small staffs have multiple roles and responsibilities, which may have bearing on whether collaboration through cross-cutting teams is considered effective.

Reorganization into cross-cutting teams is sometimes undertaken to cut costs. However, interviewees report that experience to date has shown that cross-cutting teams do not save money and should not be formed for that reason. The use of funds may change, but team formation will not reduce overall costs. Moreover, if forming partnerships must be carried out on personal time or in addition to full-time responsibilities, there may be disincentive to participate.

As in any organizational structure, some teams are more successful than others. Therefore, it is important to note that one problematic team should not reflect on the overall success of the cross-cutting team structure. Regardless of the catalyst or design structure, organization into cross-cutting teams reportedly influences the level of intra- and inter-departmental collaboration in positive ways. In fact, all seven of SEA representatives interviewed by Project FORUM recommend cross-cutting teams. They report that SEA employees are working more closely within their own departments, which may help integrate programs and activities into the larger vision of improving outcomes for all students.

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